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Commission on the Status of Women

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Agenda item 3 (b)

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: emerging issues, trends and new approaches to issues affecting the situation of women or equality between women and men: engaging young women and men, and girls and boys, to advance gender equality

Engaging young women and men, girls and boys, to advance gender equality

Moderator’s summary

1. On 6 March 2012, the Commission on the Status of Women convened an interactive panel to examine the emerging issue “Engaging young women and men, girls and boys, to advance gender equality”. Mr. Filippo Cinti, Vice-Chair of the Commission, moderated the discussion. The panellists were: Ms. Edna Akullq, founder of Self Help Foundation Uganda (Uganda); Mr. Roberto Cárcamo Tapia, member of Colectivo de Jóvenes por la Igualdad de Género (Chile); Mr. Shishir Chandra, member of Men’s Action for Stopping Violence against Women (India); and Ms. Rozaina Adam, Member of Parliament (Maldives).
2. Global normative and policy frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995 and the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly of 2000 underline the importance of engaging every member of society in promoting gender equality.
3. The engagement of youth is especially important as the population under the age of 24 comprises a sizeable share of the total population in many parts of the world. The current generation of youth is better positioned and has more opportunities than previous ones to help shape development, with greater access to information, technology, education and training. Young people can be mobilized, supported and challenged to contribute to advancing gender equality, peace, development, and human rights, yet they remain underutilized as agents of change.



4. Many participants identified gender stereotypes as a major obstacle to the advancement of gender equality because they perpetuate stereotypic perceptions of masculinity and femininity, which limit the potential of both women and men. Stereotypes are embedded in cultural, traditional and religious values and belief systems and are conveyed to youth through many channels, including their families, religious leaders, peers, education systems and the media.

5. Changing gender stereotypes not only benefits women and girls but also men and boys. Men and boys can take on jobs and opportunities that are often considered feminine such as in the nursing and care professions. Equal sharing of domestic and care responsibilities between men and women enables men to have the opportunity to better enjoy family life and improve their relationship with their spouses and children.

6. As attitudes and perceptions are shaped at an early age, sensitization on gender roles should start within the family. Several participants noted the significant impact of early socialization of children and the importance of parents and families fostering gender sensitivity from an early age. Gender sensitizing efforts challenge traditional gender roles and suggest alternative ways of thinking and behaviour that youth can associate with. For instance, whereas the traditional social definition of masculinity pressures young men and boys to appear physically strong, dominant and even violent at times, the development of alternative masculinities can instil characteristics within boys and men that promote respect and care for others.

7. Gender-sensitive education should start from primary education. Governments must encourage families to embrace and respect education and send all their children, both girls and boys, to school, for instance by providing free education. Curricula should be gender-sensitive and include age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health education as well as civic education. Educators should be trained in gender equality issues as they are role models and are most effective when they teach through example.

8. Secondary and tertiary education is also crucial for the engagement of youth in advancing gender equality. On-campus activities can foster gender equality through awareness-raising programmes designed for youth. For instance, educational workshops to promote gender equality among secondary school students have proven successful, where students themselves lead gender equality campaigns. Student discussion groups, film shows, interactive sessions and exhibitions can also provide a meaningful and effective educational and awareness-raising experience.

9. Participants noted, in particular, efforts to advance gender equality in tertiary education. These efforts include promoting academic research on gender issues, creating separate gender studies departments in universities and establishing academic degree programmes, including PhD programmes in gender studies. An increasing number of young men enrol in such programmes.

10. Nevertheless, challenges remain, as participants reported a higher enrolment rate of young men than women at secondary and tertiary level and the disproportionate participation of young women and men in certain areas of study. Governments and educational institutions should take further measures to achieve gender parity in all areas of study, for instance by encouraging both young women and men to select non-traditional fields of study.

11. To address gender stereotypes and create a culture of non-discrimination and gender equality, young people have formed groups and movements that endeavour to sensitize communities and peer groups to work for social change. They use different tools and approaches such as capacity-building and training, networking, advocating and campaigning, and working with female role models in non-traditional fields.

12. Civil society organizations, sports and other extra-curricular clubs and associations, civic and faith-based organizations can provide opportunities for leadership skills training, promote values of tolerance and democratic citizenship and bring women and men together to form a more integrated society. For instance, by engaging in sports activities, young women and girls can hone their social and leadership skills and learn to interact with young men and boys in areas of common interest.

13. Engaging youth is vital to the prevention of violence against women and girls. Young people can contribute to reducing violence against women and girls by forming pressure groups and organizations to lobby for justice for survivors of violence, sensitizing their peers, and monitoring violence at the community level for timely reporting to authorities. Participants reported that initiatives to involve young men and boys in efforts to eliminate violence against women are good entry points to engage young men in work to advance gender equality. Involving young men and boys is particularly important and effective because it can help them accept alternative models of behaviour and refrain from being pressured into roles of strength and dominance, which can lead to acts of violence.

14. Participants observed that young women are often victims of violent acts by their romantic partners. However, in some countries they do not receive adequate protection because penal laws relating to domestic violence are focused on matrimonial and/or legally cohabitating couples. Stronger support is required for young women victims of violence, including better services, laws and police response.

15. Employment is one of the primary avenues for youth to fulfil its potential and contribute to economic and social development. However, in times of economic crisis, young people face a much higher rate of unemployment than adults. In addition, young women and girls face many disadvantages due to perceptions of women as “caregivers” and men as “breadwinners”. Associating women with certain types of jobs, such as secretarial or office assistance work, limits their opportunities in accessing a wider range of positions. Stereotypes in the workplace reinforce gender inequality.

16. Participants proposed concrete steps to promote equal employment opportunities for young women and men, such as putting in place career days for young women and men to inform them of career options beyond the traditional, stereotypic choices; monitoring young women’s career and skills development; and instituting policies to further gender parity in youth employment. Steps to support young women and men in fulfilling their family and professional responsibilities should include the enforcement of more generous family leave policies and the establishment of affordable and dependable childcare centres. However, attention must be paid so that such laws and policies do not create unintended consequences. Some laws designed to promote gender equality in the workplace, such as stipulating longer periods of maternity leave, have served as a disincentive for employers to hire and retain young women, as such policies are perceived as expensive by employers.

17. Engaging youth in public life and in decision-making processes is another important way to promote gender equality. While cultural and structural bottlenecks exist to enhance the participation of young men and women in political life, including misperceptions about their lack of interest or preparedness to engage in decision-making, it is crucial to provide platforms so that young people can take ownership and responsibility in political life.

18. Several participants reported on the establishment of children and youth parliaments, where young women and men take leadership roles and familiarize themselves with parliamentary processes. Youth organizations can be effective in raising awareness of gender equality at the grass-roots level, including by targeting communities and villages. Student movements in universities have also been successful in conveying youth perspectives to political decision-makers, with many young women taking leadership positions in such movements.

19. Nevertheless, the lack of systematic efforts and volunteer opportunities in political processes prevents youth from becoming more involved. Young people face challenges in being elected as parliamentarians and in incorporating their views and priorities into laws and policies once they are in parliament. Lowering the voting age, creating youth and women's wings in political parties and allowing youth parliaments to deliberate on laws and policies that may affect young people can further improve their participation in advocating for gender equality. Young women and men may have specific issues that are better addressed within their own spaces, such as separate youth or women's wings in political parties. Quota systems can support efforts to increase youth and women's political participation in parliaments and local councils. Gender equality training programmes can be organized for government officials and parliamentarians.

20. Some participants also suggested engaging male members of parliament in youth parliaments or youth and women's wings of political parties as a means of fostering partnerships across generations, as well as between women and men. Such suggestions, however, should take into account the particular cultural and social characteristics of the society. Caution must be exercised so as not to replicate in youth and/or women's wings traditional group dynamics, with male adults gaining control over the organization and exerting their influence.

21. Ample room for improvement exists with regard to youth participation in global forums, including United Nations bodies such as the Commission on the Status of Women. Given the current underrepresentation of youth in global efforts to enhance gender equality, Member States should include a youth representative in their delegations to the Commission. Participants also called on the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) to make efforts to involve youth in a more substantial manner in different aspects of its work.

22. Many delegations noted the critical role of traditional and social media and technology in engaging youth to advance gender equality. Young people nowadays have unprecedented access to technology and exposure to traditional and social media, which facilitates the mobilization and education of, and communication with, the younger generation. For young women and men who do not have access to the latest technology or social media it is important to maintain traditional means of expression that remain valid and effective, such as peaceful street protests, university federations and student centres.

23. Participants stressed the need for financing government and civil society initiatives for youth engagement. They expressed the need for financial support from the public and private sectors for the activities of youth organizations and networks, and noted the importance of investments in youth education and employment, including social entrepreneurship.

24. Participants also pointed to the need for collecting and analysing sex- and age-disaggregated data so that the effectiveness of measures and practices can be monitored and evaluated.

Recommendations

25. Participants recommended a range of actions to engage young women and men, girls and boys to advance gender equality, including:

- Taking a comprehensive and integrated approach to the engagement of youth for gender equality that includes families, schools, political parties, youth organizations and other civil society organizations and the media.
- Instituting mechanisms to combat gender stereotypes, including through organizing broad and sustained awareness-raising campaigns and mobilizing youth in effecting social and attitudinal changes through traditional and social media and technology.
- Organizing gender equality campaigns through different types of organizations, including sports clubs, student unions and youth organizations.
- Establishing legal mechanisms and involving men and boys to address and prevent violence committed by youth.
- Promoting equal employment opportunities for youth by providing training and information on the labour market and career choices.
- Ensuring youth representation and participation in the political sphere, including by instituting quotas for young women and men in parliaments.
- Ensuring the representation of youth in international processes, including in United Nations bodies, such as the Commission on the Status of Women.
- Increasing funding for youth initiatives and activities to advance gender equality and encourage the donor community to invest in youth education and entrepreneurship, including through public-private partnerships.
- Strengthening the role of UN-Women in engaging young women and men to advance gender equality.